

Information on Smallpox and the Smallpox Vaccine

The terrorist attacks on the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. and the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001 have increased public concern about the possibility of additional terrorist attacks using biological or chemical weapons. Smallpox is one of the biological agents mentioned as a possible weapon.

WHAT IS SMALLPOX (VARIOLA VIRUS)?

- ! The last naturally occurring case of smallpox occurred in Somalia (in northeast Africa) in 1977.
- ! In 1972 routine vaccination for smallpox was discontinued in the U.S. In May, 1980 the World Health Assembly certified that the world was free of naturally occurring smallpox.
- ! At about the same time (1980) a committee of world health experts recommended that all stocks of variola virus be destroyed or transferred for safe keeping to one of two World Health Organization laboratories. One laboratory was at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia and the other was the Institute of Virus Preparations in Moscow, Russia. In 1983 vaccine distribution for general use in the civilian population was discontinued.

IF SMALLPOX WAS ERADICATED, WHY IS THERE CONCERN ABOUT IT BEING USED AS A TERRORIST WEAPON?

- ! There is concern that terrorist groups or even Arogue@governments might obtain a supply of smallpox and develop it into a biological weapon.
- ! Since routine vaccination against smallpox was discontinued in the 1970's, the general population is not protected and would be susceptible. People immunized before 1972 would probably not be protected against smallpox.

IS THE SMALLPOX VACCINE AVAILABLE TO ANYONE WHO WANTS IT?

- ! The answer is no. Health departments do not carry the vaccine.
- ! Today only members of the U.S. military, laboratory technicians, researchers and health care specialists working on smallpox or similar viruses are routinely vaccinated.
- ! Supplies of smallpox vaccine are controlled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and can only be released under special circumstances.
- ! The U.S. government has contracted with a private vaccine supplier to increase production of a smallpox vaccine. The vaccine will be stockpiled for use in the event of a bioterrorist attack.

See *Maccinia (Smallpox) Vaccine Recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), 2001* in Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, June 22, 2001/50(RR10); 1-25. Available at the CDC's website www.cdc.gov/mmwr.